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Media Monitor

Center for Media and Public Affairs • 2101 L Street, NW • Suite 505 • Washington, D.C. 20037 202-223-2942

Volume III, Number 5 June 1989

The Low Profile President

First Reports on the Bush Administration

How have the networks covered George Bush and his administration since Inauguration Day? We monitored 631 stories on the ABC, CBS, and NBC nightly news during the first 100 days of the Bush administration (January 20 through April 29), along with political humor on NBC "Tonight Show" monologues. This month's *Media Monitor* also examines all evaluations of policies and personnel during the administration's first 50 days (through March 11).

Major Findings

■ **Peerless Leader** - During his first 100 days in office, Bush attracted only 37% as many stories as Ronald Reagan in 1981, and 45% as many as Jimmy Carter in 1977. *Page 2*

■ **Goodbye Tower** - Opinion on Senator Tower ran 8 to 1 negative among non-partisan sources. 40% of stories airing charges provided no rebuttal time. *Page 2*

■ **Mixed Reviews** - Bush got good marks from three out of five sources. But his policies were criticized by seven out of ten. *Page 3*

■ **CBS Votes No** - Evaluations of Bush were only 39% positive on CBS, compared to 63% positive on NBC and 85% on ABC. Ratings of Bush's policies ran 4 to 1 negative on CBS. *Page 3*

CHINA UPDATE - The networks ran 176 stories on China in 12 days during and after Gorbachev's visit. CBS led with 75 stories. The coverage increased after the government halted network transmissions.

Media Monitor (copyright 1989) is published ten times a year by the Center for Media and Public Affairs, a nonpartisan and non-profit research organization. The Center conducts scientific studies of how the media treat social and political issues.

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The Vanishing President

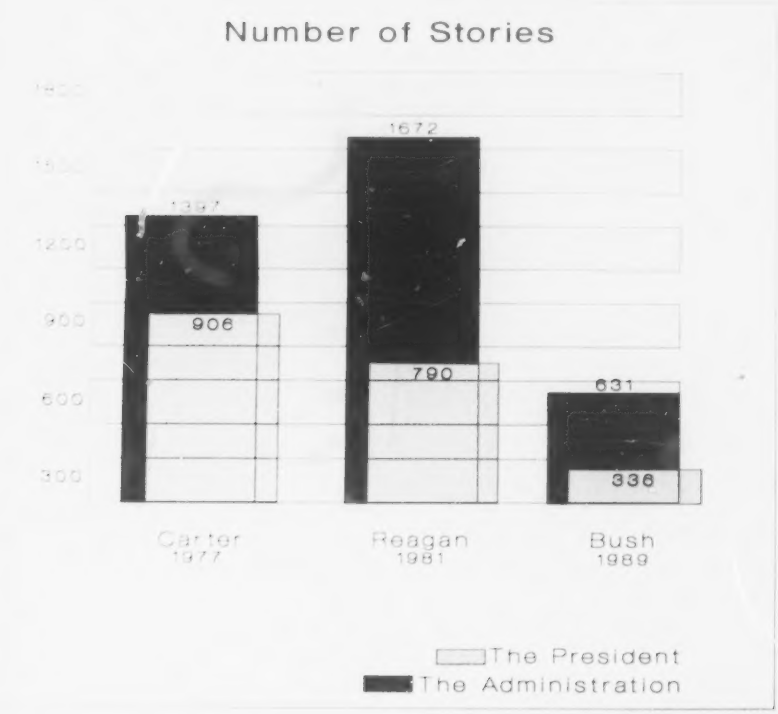
This is the first report from the Center's ongoing tracking of how TV news covers the presidency. We monitor all stories on the Bush administration from the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening newscasts. The data on the amount of coverage run through the first 100 days of the new administration, from January 20 to April 29. The full analysis reflects the first 50 days, from January 20 to March 11.

During Bush's first 100 days in office, he was the focus of 336 TV news stories, an average of barely one per network per day. This is less than half the number devoted to his most recent predecessors at comparable points in their first terms. Bush was the focus of only 37% as many stories as Ronald Reagan in 1981 and 43% as many as Jimmy Carter in 1977. (The earlier figures are derived from the Vanderbilt University TV News Abstracts.)

Overall figures for the entire administration are similar. This administration's 631 stories were 45% of the total devoted to Reagan's administration and 38% of Carter's.

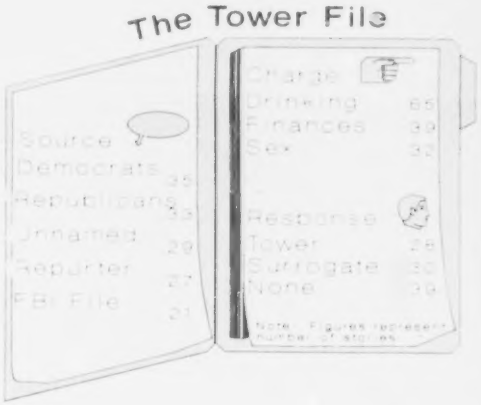
More and more observers are giving (Bush) failing grades ... for policy drift and slowness ... too much emphasis on style, not enough on developing a coherent policy ... an administration floundering.

-Lesley Stahl
CBS, 1/24

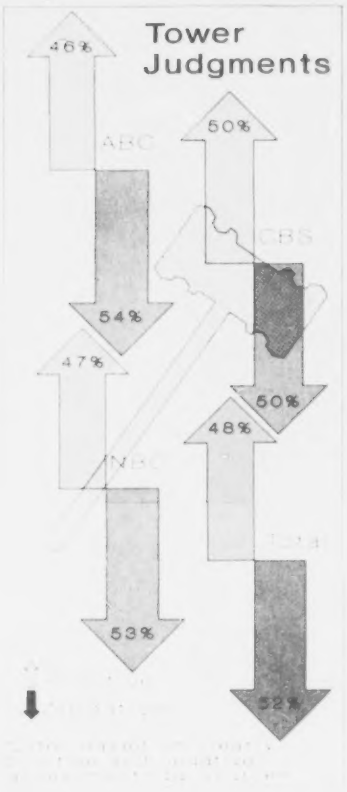


Tower's Troubles

The major story of the Bush administration's first two months was the Senate's rejection of Defense Secretary-designate John Tower. The ethics or morality of Tower's private life was discussed in 98 stories. The most widely discussed charge was alcohol abuse, which was raised in 65 stories, followed by financial conflicts of interest (39 stories), and sexual impropriety (32 stories). Discussions of these issues were raised by Democrats and Republicans in about equal numbers (35 vs. 33 stories). The media's role in the proceedings became an issue after widespread reporting of allegations from unnamed sources and confidential FBI files. We found that 35% of all stories questioning Tower's personal behavior or ethics contained allegations from unnamed sources, 25% referenced FBI reports, and 32% relied on unattributed statements by reporters themselves. When such charges were raised, they often contained no response from the nominee. Tower himself replied to criticisms in 29% of all stories, and his supporters provided on-air responses in 31% more, leaving 40% that challenged his behavior without providing a rebuttal.



Tower's behavior was judged by 162 clearly positive or negative source ratings. Evaluations of Tower's behavior were about evenly balanced - 52% to 48% positive. Criticism was strongest among non-partisan sources, whose negative comments outweighed positive ones by an 8 to 1 margin (89% to 11%). Among partisans, 77% of Republican sources defended Tower, compared to only 23% of Democratic sources.

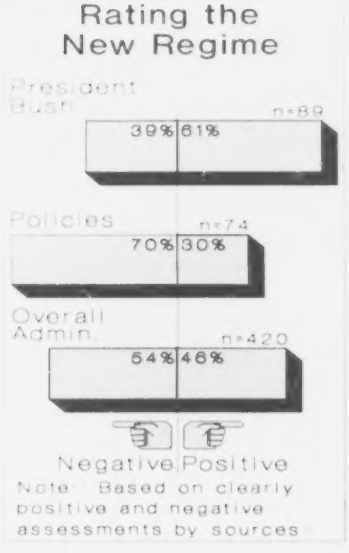


Honeymoon Watch

Overall George Bush got good marks from the media. But his personal reviews were not matched by those of his policy proposals or his administration as a whole. Bush was often praised for his civility and his efforts to reach out to opponents and consider new ideas. But his administration was criticized for lack of vision and leadership, slowness and drift in start-up, and for specific policy choices such as the proposed savings and loan bailout.

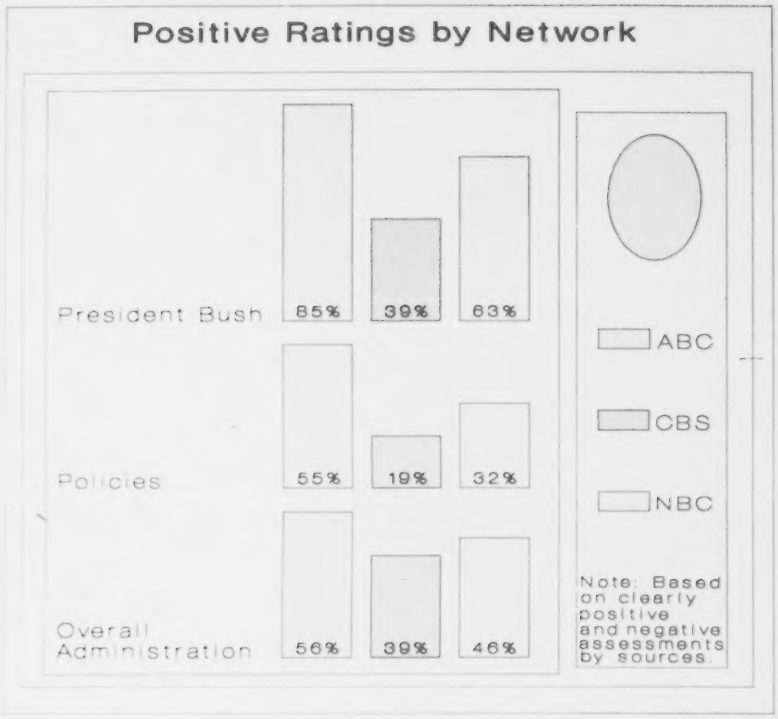
We coded all positive and negative assessments of Bush's personal style, ethics, job performance, and issue stances. Over three out of five judgments (61%) were positive, up sharply from the meager 34% positive rating he received during the general election. Moreover, his ratings were even better among non-partisan sources (63% positive) than among those identified as Republicans or Democrats (60% positive). For example, ABC's Brit Hume gave a glowing critique of a press conference (1/27) that, he said, showed "George Bush at his good-humored best." And on February 20 the same network ran a man-in-the-street interview that concluded, "I like what (Bush) seems to stand for, even though I'm a Democrat."

Yet this media honeymoon did not extend beyond the person of the President. Comments on Bush's policy proposals have run over two to one negative (70% to 30%). Thus, NBC broadcast a man-in-the-street interview (1/25) calling the administration's proposed S & L bailout "the nuttiest proposal I've ever heard." Dan Rather criticized Bush's foreign policy as "largely unfocused and on hold" (3/6). And his colleague Wyatt Andrews commented sarcastically (2/17) that the education budget "means cuts in old programs (inner city schools) counted on before while the 'education president' spends the money somewhere else." Overall, assessments of the administration were tilted slightly toward the negative column, by 54% to 46%. But the majority of plaudits came from Republican partisans. Non-partisan sources turned thumbs down on the administration, by nearly a 2 to 1 margin (63% to 37%).



CBS vs. Bush

Our most striking finding is an unusual difference of opinion among the networks. Bush was praised regularly on ABC (85% positive) and NBC (63% positive) but only rarely on CBS (39% positive). For example, on January 24 Lesley Stahl declared, "(On) the budget deficit, (Bush) hit the ground walking. ... It's Day Two and there isn't even agreement on a format for budget talks." And Wyatt Andrews complained on February 11 that, "He's asked to rearrange national priorities but with a budget that doesn't rearrange them by much." CBS has consistently rated Bush more poorly than the other two networks (46% positive source judgments on CBS vs. 53% on ABC and NBC combined during the



primaries, and 30% vs. 36% positive during the general election). But a gap of this magnitude (39% vs. 73%) is very unusual. Moreover, CBS was also toughest on the administration's policies. CBS's policy evaluations ran over 4 to 1 negative (81% to 19%) compared to a 2 to 1 negative rating on NBC (68% to 32%) and a slight positive edge (by 55% to 45%) on ABC.

No Laughing Matter

In keeping with his low media profile, Bush continued to be outstripped by other members of his administration in "Tonight Show" monologues. (During the campaign he was outpaced by Dan Quayle.) The administration's first hundred days found John Tower as its leading joke-getter with 56, compared to 52 for Bush and 35 for Quayle. Tower proved an irresistible target for one-liners about drinking and wenching: "The FBI interviewed over 400 witnesses, and those were just the bartenders" (Leno, 2/28); "Tower thought he had over 90 votes in the Senate, but he was just seeing double" (Leno, 2/28); "He's going out to be debimboed at the Gary Hart clinic" (Carson, 3/9). But the Senators also took some flak for hypocrisy: "The Senate judging John Tower on his moral character, that's like Morton Downey lecturing Geraldo on good taste" (Leno, 3/6).

Meanwhile Quayle jokes continued at a brisk pace. Sample: "The Treasury Department is selling a Dan Quayle bond. The only problem is that it takes about 48 years to mature" (Carson, 3/27). But news reports of Bush's slow start found their way into numerous monologues: "George is really off to a flying stop" (Carson, 3/24); "Bush is off to a shaky start. His 1000 points of light are marked down to 500 this week at Sears" (Carson, 3/10); and "the environmental president ... the education president ... the new ethics president ... he better get cracking or he'll be the ex-president" (Carson 4/7). Johnny Carson even joked about Bush's lack of media coverage: "President Bush is not getting nearly the television time Reagan did ... I think he's getting desperate -- (on) 'Hollywood Squares' I heard someone say, 'the President of the United States to block, John'" (Carson, 3/17).

China Coverage

	Gorbachev Visit (5/14 - 5/18)	Post-Visit (5/19 - 5/25)	*Total*
ABC	17	35	*52*
CBS	34	41	*75*
NBC	19	30	*49*
Total	**70**	**106**	***176***

Note: Number of stories.

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Volume III, Number 6 July/August 1989

The Budget and the Deficit

Covering the Battle Over the Budget

How have the media covered the partisan struggle over the 1989 federal budget and the deficit problem? We analyzed 236 news stories in the *Washington Post* and the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening news (5 hours 38 minutes of airtime) from November 1, 1988 until the budget compromise agreement on May 18, 1989. This month's *Media Monitor* also examines political humor on late-night TV shows during the first six months of the Bush administration.

Major findings:

- **Deficit Watch** - The budget deficit got more coverage than spending for defense, health, education, social security, the homeless, and the environment combined. *Page 2*

- **Thumbs Down** - 97% of all sources rejected the administration's economic projections. *Page 3*

- **No to Taxes** - Sources rejected tax increases by 71% to 29%. *Page 3*

- **Yes to Spending** - But 63% of sources called for increased federal spending; only 22% called for budget cuts. *Page 3*

HUMOR UPDATE We catalogued 1228 political jokes on late-night TV since Inauguration Day. Bush led with 83 jokes, but Quayle was closing fast with 78. Oil spills were joked about nearly twice as often as any other topic. *Page 4*

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The Budget Story

We monitored the network evening news and *Washington Post* coverage of the federal budget and the deficit from November 1, 1988, as President Bush prepared to take office, until May 18, 1989, when the Bush administration and Congressional Democrats agreed to a budget compromise. During this period the networks aired 123 budget-related stories running a cumulative 5 hours 38 minutes, and the *Post* printed 113 stories totalling 2292 column inches. Among the networks ABC lagged behind with 34 stories (81 minutes), compared to CBS's 45 stories (131 minutes) and NBC's 44 stories (126 minutes).

"You can read George Bush's lips, but you can't read his mind."

- Rep. Jim Sasser (D-TN)
Washington Post, 12/12/88

Deficits and Taxes

Deficits and taxes are becoming the "death and taxes" of economic news - unpleasant but apparently unavoidable topics that dominate the agenda for debate. Looming constantly over the budget battle was the problem of the deficit. It was mentioned in more stories (139) than any other single topic, more than Republican and Democratic budgetary strategies combined.

Among issue areas addressed by the budget, by far the most attention went to tax policy (68 stories). Among program areas, defense spending led the list (45 stories), but most discussion concerned cuts rather than new or expanded programs. Health came next (28 stories), dominated by discussion of catastrophic health care. Among all other programs, only the savings and loan failures (19) and education initiatives (16) attracted more than ten stories. After homelessness (9) and social security (8), no other topic garnered over five stories.

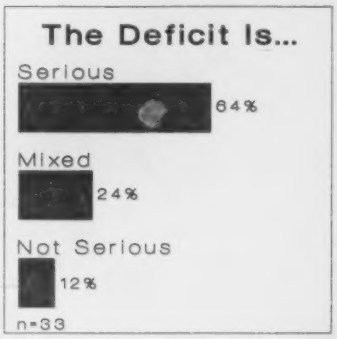
Issues Discussed

Taxes	**68**
Defense	**45**
Health	**28**
S&L's	**19**
Education	**16**
Homeless	**9**
Social Security	**8**
Environment	**5**

The networks differed little in terms of their program coverage, but the *Post's* coverage was more heavily focused on some topics than was television's. The *Post* ran twice as many stories as all three networks combined on military spending, the savings and loan bailout, and funding for the homeless. The *Post* also exceeded the combined network total of the stories on tax policy.

Spend Now Pay Later

Debate over budget issues was muted by President Bush's low-key bargaining with the Democratic controlled Congress and the resulting bipartisan agreement announced May 18. Thus, much of the news focused on the seriousness of the deficit problem and the unrealistic nature of the administration's economic projections, rather than the merits of particular programs or funding proposals.



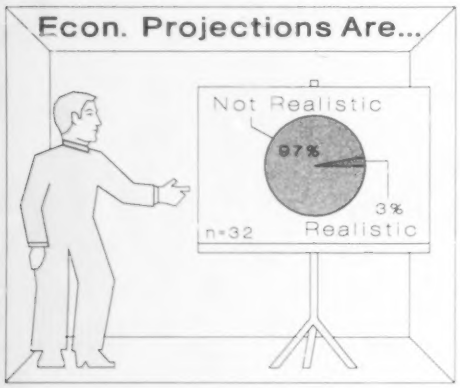
An often repeated theme concerned the gravity of the current deficit and its likely continuation. This subject was debated 33 times, and only 4 sources (12%) denied that it was a serious problem. Among the dissenters was economist John Makin, interviewed on NBC (2/5): "Those who are saying that the deficit is serious will always wind up saying we have to raise taxes. It is a serious political issue. It's not a serious economic issue."

For the most part, however, sources echoed the conclusion of former Presidents Ford and Carter that "the federal debt...is a symbol of our unwillingness to match our resources to our demands and our own ends, to try to make critical choices among competing priorities." (*Washington Post*, 1/23) Opinion was sufficiently consensual that reporters were unafraid to add their own voices to the chorus. Thus, the *Post's* Paul Blustein wrote on Jan 25 that the deficit "threatens to sap America's long-term

economic health...because it worsens the nation's principal economic problem: We consume too much and save too little."

Projections and Rejections

Almost as common as statements of the deficit's importance were rejections of the administration's economic predictions, which form the basis for the revenue side of the budget. Of 32 sources who evaluated these projections, all but one (97%) criticized or dismissed them. Thus, according to a January 5 report in the *Post*, "Many economists scoff at the administration's [deficit] forecast, especially



because it includes a prediction of rapid economic growth over the next six years," and NBC (4/14) quoted Sen. Lloyd Bentsen's (D-TX) reaction to the final compromise, "The agreement's economic assumptions are wildly optimistic."

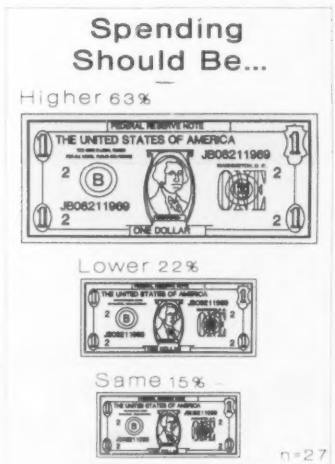
Taxing and Spending

Budget debates are traditionally about government's trade-offs between taxing and spending. Despite all the alarms about the deficit, however, spending was advocated far more often than taxing.

Among the 45 viewpoints aired or printed on changes in tax rates, those rejecting tax increases or calling for cuts outnumbered those favoring tax hikes by 71% to 29%. For example, the *Post* quoted Ronald Reagan (1/10), "Tax increases are not needed. History shows that they would simply be used by the Congress to increase spending."

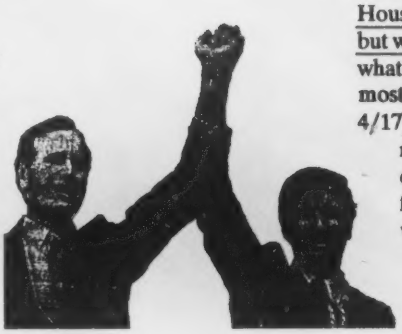
Opinion was much more closely divided on the value of a tax increase specifically to deal with the budget deficit. On this narrower issue, tax opponents outnumbered advocates by only 54% to 46%. For example, the *Post's* Blustein reported (11/30), "much of the nation's corporate and labor elite is united around the idea that shrinking the deficit is of paramount importance - and that the imposition of a tax increase is probably unavoidable."

At the same time, most sources who discussed government spending called for increased outlays. Among 27 sources quoted, 63% called for greater funding of programs, 15% argued that spending should be held constant, and only 22% called for budget cuts. Justifications of increased spending came from Republicans more often than Democrats. For example, the *Post* (2/18) quoted President Bush's cautious conclusion that, "Yes, we can afford to increase spending, modestly, selectively, and only after tough choices are made." On CBS (2/11), however, Wyatt Andrews criticized the Bush budget for not spending enough on social programs: "His kinder, gentler spending proposals are wide but not deep. He's asked to rearrange the national priorities, but with a budget that doesn't rearrange them by much."



The Joke's On ...

From January 20 through July 20, opening monologues on NBC's "Tonight Show" and "Late Night" included 1228 jokes on political topics and current affairs.



The leading individual target of TV comedians' sallies was George Bush with 83. Samples: "President Bush got very upset about the Court's recent decision on flag burning. I can understand his point of view. If you're going to wrap yourself in the flag you don't want somebody setting fire to it." (Leno, 6/28); "(He's) off to a shaky start. (His) 1000 points of light are marked down to 500 this week at Sears." (Carson, 3/10) But many of the Bush jokes came during his first weeks in office. Dan Quayle has been coming on strong, with 42 jokes to 31 for Bush since May 1, to vie for the overall lead with 78 jokes.

"Quayle jokes" are becoming a distinctive genre, focusing on the Vice-President's alleged lack of intelligence or other qualifications for office: "If Dan Quayle were a woman he'd be pointing at dinette sets on a game show." (Carson, 5/5); "When Quayle heard it was the 20th anniversary of the Moon Walk he sent Michael Jackson a telegram." (Leno, 7/17);

Top Ten People Targetted on Late Night TV

George Bush	83
Dan Quayle	78
John Tower	58
Ayatollah Khomeini	49
Jim Wright	33
Ronald Reagan	28
Oliver North	24
Joseph Hazelwood	18
Rob Lowe	17
Manuel Noriega	14

"President Bush (in Europe) was greeted by people shouting 'Long live Bush' So apparently the Europeans know all about Dan Quayle too." (Leno, 7/17)

Overheard at George Bush's birthday party: "This gift has special meaning to me, Mr. Quayle, because you colored it yourself."

David Letterman
June 13, 1989

Rejected Defense Secretary nominee John Tower provided a lot of material for comedians during his confirmation hearings (58 jokes): "Personally I'm for John Tower. I like the idea of having a defense department with a happy hour." (Leno, 3/3). Jim Wright's problems as House Speaker were parodied less frequently, but with equal verve: "Most people don't realize what a gifted man he is. That's the problem - most of the gifts haven't been reported." (Leno, 4/17) As for the Ayatollah Khomeini, he remained the butt of jokes as frequently in death as in life: "The Ayatollah was buried face down. They did this so he could see where he was going." (Leno, 6/12);

We also classified jokes by topics rather than individuals. The leader by far was oil spills, which attracted nearly twice as many jokes (160) as any other topic. The main target was Exxon's Alaskan spill: "Yesterday at the beach I held a shell up to my ear and heard a recorded apology from Exxon." (Leno, 6/27); "Last week (Exxon) said that salmon swimming upstream are getting 30% better mileage." (Leno, 5/30) But other jokes were more general, lampooning the oil industry's threats to the environment: "The American Petroleum Institute said today we don't export enough American oil. Oh yeah? Just wait 'til the tide goes out." (Leno, 5/31);

Iran (89), the Tower hearings (63) and Iran-contra (keyed to Oliver North's trial and sentencing) (54) also generated bursts of topical humor, as did the demonstrations in China (50). David Letterman's "Top 10 Chinese Tourist Slogans" (6/15) included, "Free interrogation and beating with valid student ID!" and "When it comes to fun, we beat everybody!" Other steady performers were Crime and Drugs (45) and Congressional ethics (40). In addition to jokes about individuals like Jim Wright and Buz Lukens, the institution took a beating: "The Supreme Court okayed the death penalty for the mentally and morally deficient. I guess this is their way of keeping Congress in line." (Leno, 6/28); "The Home Shopping Network is going to merge with C-SPAN for those who want the convenience of buying a politician in your own home." (Leno, 6/19)

Rounding out the list of top ten topics, there were 29 cracks at baseball, 28 Panama jokes, and 22 jabs at Supreme Court rulings.

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Volume III, Number 7 September 1989

TV's China Syndrome

How the Networks Covered the China Story

How did television news cover the turmoil in China this spring? And how did their crisis reporting compare to coverage in calmer times? We examined 577 stories that the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening newscasts aired on China from January 1 through June 30, representing 18 hours 26 minutes of total airtime. In addition, we monitored jokes about China that ran on NBC's "Tonight Show" and "Late Night."

Major findings:

■ **Discovering China** - More stories appeared during the month following Gorbachev's May 14 visit than in the entire decade following the 1972 thaw in US-China relations. Gorbachev's five-day visit alone produced more coverage than in all of 1988. *Page 2*

■ **News Follows Anchors** - Led by on-site Dan Rather, CBS aired almost 90 minutes more total footage than ABC and no-show Peter Jennings. *Page 2*

■ **Video Violence** - TV news visuals showed demonstrators committing violence nearly as often as the security forces. *Page 4*

■ **False Spring** - China's good press dropped from 45% positive through May to only 23% positive after the June crackdown. *Page 4*

■ **The Good News Network** - ABC reporters gave far more positive assessments of Chinese state and society than their CBS and NBC colleagues. *Page 5*

Nervous Laughter China was the focus of one in eight topical jokes on late-night TV during the spring crisis. *Page 6*

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Discovering China

This spring American television cameras focused the eyes of the world on China, as Gorbachev's visit spotlighted a month of protests, crises, and eventual government crackdowns. To analyze the changing media images of China, we examined all 527 stories that appeared on the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening news from January 1 through June 30.

That six month period covered President Bush's visit in February, violence in Tibet over Chinese rule in March, student demonstrations beginning in April, Gorbachev's visit in May, and the subsequent tug of war between student protesters and party officials ending with the June massacre in Beijing's Tiananmen Square. Until mid May the networks [illegible] than one story per night. Then Gorbachev's visit on May 14 ushered in a month of saturation coverage that concluded when Chinese authorities clamped down on foreign broadcasts in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square massacre.

How concentrated was the coverage? The networks aired 357 stories in the month from May 14 to June 14, an average of nearly 13 stories per night. That was more stories than they broadcast in the entire decade from 1972 to 1981, when mainland China was "opened" to media inspection after the thaw in U.S. relations.

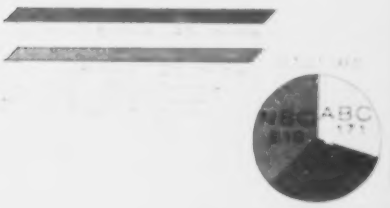
"What a place, what a time, what a story!"

Dan Rather
CBS Evening News

Gorbachev's five day visit in May alone produced half again as many stories as the networks ran in all of 1988 (70 vs. 44).

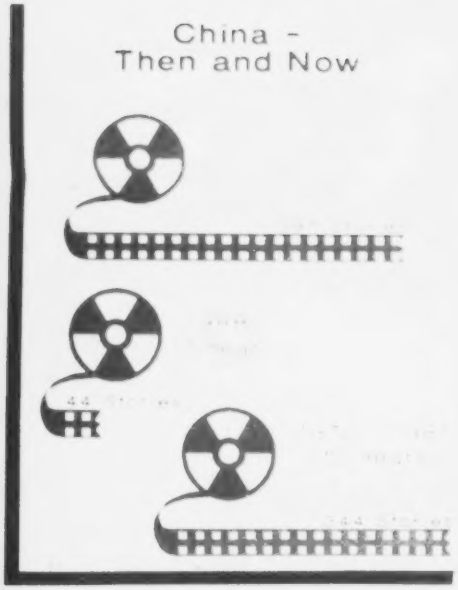
The coverage followed the anchors, as CBS produced the most airtime on China and ABC the least. Led by Dan Rather, in town to cover Gorbachev's Beijing visit, CBS carried 187 stories

Amount of Coverage



with total airtime of 6 hours 48 minutes. Tom Brokaw arrived almost a month after Rather, and NBC carried 6 hours 25 minutes of coverage. The number of stories on NBC actually exceeded CBS's total with 219. Peter Jennings was a no show, and ABC pulled up the rear with only 171 stories and 5 hours 16 minutes of coverage, almost 80 minutes less than on CBS.

China - Then and Now



"What made the crackdown so startling was...the rosy view of China that had been painted by the media."

Tom Shales
Washington Post

Making News

TV news loves action, conflict, and a good real life storyline. So it was no surprise that protests and demonstrations made up the largest categories of topics covered. Peaceful demonstrations were featured in 179 stories, more than the total of all stories on government activities (156). The media became a major part of the story, as the government's efforts to manipulate domestic and foreign media images were featured 73 times. Thus, China's relations with the media were chronicled more often than its relations with either the American or Soviet governments (42 and 45 stories respectively).

Americans got an unusual opportunity to hear from ordinary Chinese reacting to the tumultuous events in their country, as 54 stories focused on public reaction. The Chinese justice system also came under intense scrutiny after the army crackdown; 37 stories aired in a 21 day period.

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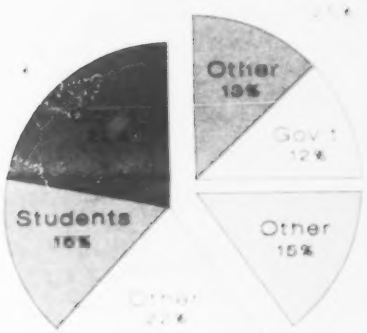
Despite television's reputation for magnifying violent events, violent demonstrations (including those in Tibet) failed to make the "top 10" list, attracting only 32 stories.

Major Topics

State Baker (26) had by far the greatest visibility of U.S. leaders commenting on the events. A substantial minority of non-government sources were Chinese Americans, who made up 3% of the total source list. Other foreign sources accounted for 5% of all citations, led by Soviet leader Gorbachev (13).

Sources



Ordinary People

The networks' presence in China provided a unique opportunity to interview ordinary people and dissidents, as well as the usual government sources. Among 1802 sources quoted, 761 were Chinese, and a solid majority of those were non-government sources. Ordinary citizens, often quoted in man-on-the-street settings or in vignettes about life among the populace, accounted for 22% of all sources. That equalled the exposure given to all government officials and spokesmen, including the government-controlled media. Officials quoted most often were Li Peng (29 times), Deng Xiaoping (19) and Zhao Ziyang (12). The remaining 16% were students involved in protests and demonstrations. If the government-controlled media reports are excluded from the totals, the number of student sources roughly equalled that of government spokesmen. The networks also sought out a variety of dissenting voices. Only 19% of the student sources were identified as "leaders".

An additional one in four individuals quoted were Americans, split about evenly between government and non-government sources. President Bush (32 citations) and Secretary of

> "I can't think of any parallel in human history."
>
> Charles Kuralt
> CBS Sunday Morning

Pictures of Protest

TV news is not only words but pictures. And the pictures in this story were unusually dramatic. To examine the visual aspect of the coverage, we coded every scene shown. In this coding system, the scene changed every time a different camera shot showed a new setting or development. For example, a shot of protesters that cut to another shot of soldiers responding was coded as two scenes. This procedure yielded 10,838 visual scenes of events in China.

The most common scene was one of peaceful protest (2792 visuals), followed by 2520 "contextual" shots establishing the context of events with man-on-the-street interviews, vignettes of life in China, etc. These two categories accounted for almost half of the visuals American audiences saw from China. Pictures of violence, interviews with government officials, and visits by foreign leaders Bush and Gorbachev all fell far behind these totals. In fact, our study demonstrates the degree to which Gorbachev's visit

to Beijing was upstaged by the protesters. The networks showed nearly twice as many pictures of demonstrators as Soviet officials during his visit.

On the other hand, our findings call into question the much noted use of "sign language" by Chinese protesters who carried English or other foreign language signs aimed at the international media. Signs in English showed up on American TV news 19 times in 154 stories (12%) before Gorbachev left Beijing. Such signs appeared only five times out of 183 stories (3%) thereafter, despite the fact that the number of stories showing Chinese language signs increased from 61 to 72. Thus, it appears that the demonstrators planned to appeal to international audiences during Gorbachev's visit, but they did not continue this strategy as their protests spread and a crackdown became imminent.

Finally, and surprisingly, the pictures sometimes contradicted the words of sympathy for the protesters that were often heard from American reporters. Among 127 scenes of one-sided violence portrayed, the demonstrators accounted for nearly half (47%), including throwing stones or Molotov cocktails, fist fights, etc. Security force actions made up a slight majority (53%) of violent scenes, such as firing weapons or driving tanks over demonstrator encampments. (These figures exclude a small number of scenes showing violence by both sides, as well as scenes of protest and violence in Tibet.)

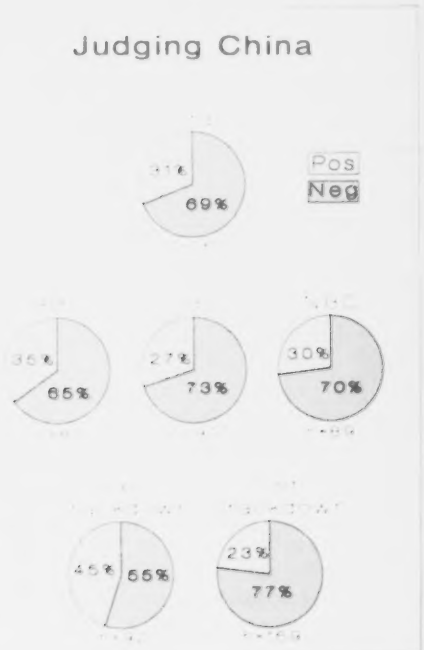
The networks varied in their selection of violent visuals. NBC actually showed more shots of protesters than security forces committing violence (58% to 42%). ABC showed slightly more violence by security forces (52% to 48%), and the spread was greater on CBS - 59% by the security forces and only 41% by the demonstrators.

"Will this be something like Kent State was for our military?"

Eric Engberg
"CBS Nightwatch"

Bejing's False Spring

For China's leaders, an international showcase turned into a public relations disaster. We examined 261 clearly positive or negative statements that reporters and sources directed toward events or policies in China. The result was overwhelmingly negative, by 69% to 31%. But those totals mask a roller-coaster of coverage that followed the dramatic events of the period and the hopes and fears they engendered. Prior to the April 15 death of Hu Yaobang, a hero to the student protesters, assessments were rare (about one per week) but



balanced - 47% positive to 53% negative. At that point the coverage shifted from a context of normalcy to one of crisis. The subsequent demonstrations that continued throughout Gorbachev's visit produced a wave of criticism, with comments running about two to one negative (34% to 66%). Commentary took an upswing during the last two weeks in May, as hopes for reform and restraint were aired while the students occupied Tiananmen Square. During this time positive comments actually outweighed negative ones by 62% to 38%.

China's good press ended on June 3 when the army moved in to crush the demonstrations. During the crackdown (June 3-4) criticism outweighed praise by 85% to 15%, and media judgments remained nearly as negative the rest of the month. Overall, the coverage remained relatively balanced prior to the Tiananmen Square massacre - 45% positive to 55% negative from January 1 through June 2. During the rest

of June, assessments were over three to one negative (77% to 23%).

The most frequent point of criticism concerned the authorities' use of force. It was condemned 52 times and defended only 17 times (75% to 25%). All 69 comments occurred after the army moved in on June 3. And reporters felt unusually free to lend their own authority to the criticism. We coded eight seperate negative statements by reporters on this topic. As NBC's Keith Morrison put it that night, "A lot of people here this morning will be remembering something Chairman Mao once said: 'Whoever suppresses the students will come to no good end.'" But the regime's system of justice received an even higher proportion of bad press (89% negative to 11% positive judgments), mostly during the roundup of dissidents that followed the crackdown. The justice system (including human rights issues) had been evaluated only twice prior to the army's actions.

That level of bad press was about equalled by the 12% positive to 88% negative ratings over the state of China's political system. Tom Brokaw expressed the majority opinion in his June 13 report: "Just ten days ago, [Tiananmen] Square was jammed with people demanding democracy. Now Mao Zedong looks out on a scene only an authoritarian could love."

The regime did better in coverage of its economic affairs, which ran 58% positive to 42% negative. These figures conceal a somewhat negative view of the current state of the economy, which was balanced by positive judgments of the economic reforms that have been instituted. For example, ABC's Richard Threlkeld reported on May 12, "China's people are better off because of Deng's economic reforms." Morever, like so much of the coverage, this distinction was time-sensitive. Most discussion of the economic reforms took place during the period of crisis, while the state of the economy received the most attention before hunger strikes began.

In the political realm, the authorities' best press came on a surprising topic - the imposition of martial law (10 out of 14 positive comments, or 71%). Several government officials and Chinese media spokesmen made the case for using martial law to maintain order, while few critics of the government addressed the issue. A major reason for this imbalance was the critics' fears of speaking out to foreign reporters. On June 12, for example, ABC's Jim Laurie recounted a conversation with one fearful Chinese citizen: "He put his hand over his heart and said, 'In here I know what happened,' but then putting his hand over his mouth, 'but I will never say.'" Indeed, much of the government's good press on all topics came from its own spokesmen. Overall, government controlled sources were 89% positive in their assessments, compared to only 22% among all other Chinese sources, 35% among American reporters, and 24% among all other non-Chinese sources.

The three networks were united in criticizing the regime, but there were some differences in degree. CBS was the most critical, with nearly three to one negative judgments (73% to 27%). On NBC the level of criticism was 70% and on ABC it dropped below two to one at 65% bad press. CBS was also most critical of the authorities' use of force, with only one positive comment in seven (14%), compared to about one in four (24%) on ABC and one in three (33%) on NBC.

These overall distinctions, based on all source comments, were reflected in the judgements voiced by journalists themselves. ABC reporters and anchors offered by far the most positive assessments in the aggregate. Their 20 on-camera evaluations of Chinese policies and events were equally divided between praise and criticism. By contrast, CBS and NBC journalists each offered only three positive evaluations, compared to 18 negative evaluations on CBS and 21 on NBC. Thus, journalists' own assessments of state and society ran six to one negative on CBS and seven to one negative on NBC, in contrast to ABC's even split. The good press on

ABC came early; no network reporter offered any positive assessment after the June 3 crackdown.

Back to the Future

The media engaged in far more speculation than evaluation. Among the favorite topics in the guessing game were the future course of the demonstrations, the government's likely response, the impact on the Communist regime and its relations with the USA. On all these questions, reporters and sources frequently hedged their bets by calling the situation unclear or citing more than one possible outcome. But sometimes they hedged themselves right out of a penetrating insight. For example, Peter Jennings reported on May 26, "we heard a young girl say, 'if Li Peng has more power than the students, we'll be killed.' No American analyst can believe that Li Peng would be so stupid or unfeeling as to resolve the crisis that way."

In the wake of the crackdown, predictions of the system's collapse proved popular. More sources (9) forsaw the death of Communism in China than either a continuation of the status quo or partial liberalization (7). But all these options were dwarfed by the number (17) who pronounced the outcome unclear. Opinion on the future of US-China relations was equally fragmented. Among the 44 forecasts, 9% foresaw improvements, 30% predicted further deterioration, 25% opted for continuation of the status quo, and 36% found the picture too hazy to choose.

LAST LAUGHS

Despite its somber outcome, the China story became a major source of topical humor for comedians on late night television. From May 22 through June 30, 48 China jokes were featured on the opening monologues of NBC's "Tonight Show" and "Late Night." During that time, events in China accounted for one out of every eight jokes on current affairs by Johnny Carson, Jay Leno, and David Letterman. That made China the fifth most joked-about topic on late-night TV for the first half of 1989, after oil spills, Iran, John Tower's Senate confirmation hearings, and the Iran-contra/Oliver North affair.

Many of the jokes reflected the hopeful days of late May. Thus, Carson admonished an unreceptive audience (5/26), "Do you know how lucky you are? Do you realize there are one million students going to bed in China without any comedy?" Leno had a more ideological comment on May 22: "Communism is a pretty confusing ideology. (Gorbachev) leaves the Soviet Union where there are thousands of starving people and he goes to China where there are thousands of students on a hunger strike." But many of the jokes were apolitical. Letterman claimed (5/24), "The whole thing in China is over, all the students went home. Turned out it was just spring break." And Leno cracked (6/1), "China is the worst place to go on a hunger strike because if you don't eat, an hour later you don't eat again."

The festive air ended after June 3 as Carson and Leno turned to less tragic topics. On "Late Night", however, the humor turned black. Letterman twitted official reluctance to admit to armed intervention with his "Top Ten Announcements by the Chinese Government" (6/21). They included, "the tanks were just here to do a little light moving;" and "there better not be any more protests like the one that didn't take place last month." Most telling though, were his "Top Ten Chinese Tourist Slogans" (6/15, see box).

David Letterman's Top Ten Chinese Tourist Slogans

10) We're cracking down on dull vacations!
9) We'll throw another dissident on the barbie!
8) There's an outside chance you'll see Dan Rather clubbed senseless.
7) We'll steal your heart and confiscate your film.
6) Remember how you used to like our cute pandas?
5) Free interrogation and beating with valid student I.D.
4) Visit the Szechuan county fair with special guest star Mac Davis.
3) Democracy: never had it, never will!
2) When it comes to fun, we beat everybody!
1) Ba-boom! Ba-ding! Beijing!